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"The Church Ministering to Human Wants."

THE SERMON

PREACHED IN TRINITY CHURCH, BOSTON,
BEFORE

THE GENERAL CONVENTION OF THE
PROTESTANT EPISCOPAL CHURCH

In the United States,

ON WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 3, 1877.

BY THE
RIGHT REV. J. WILLIAMS, D.D.
BISHOP OF CONNECTICUT.

PRINTED FOR THE HOUSE OF DEPUTIES.
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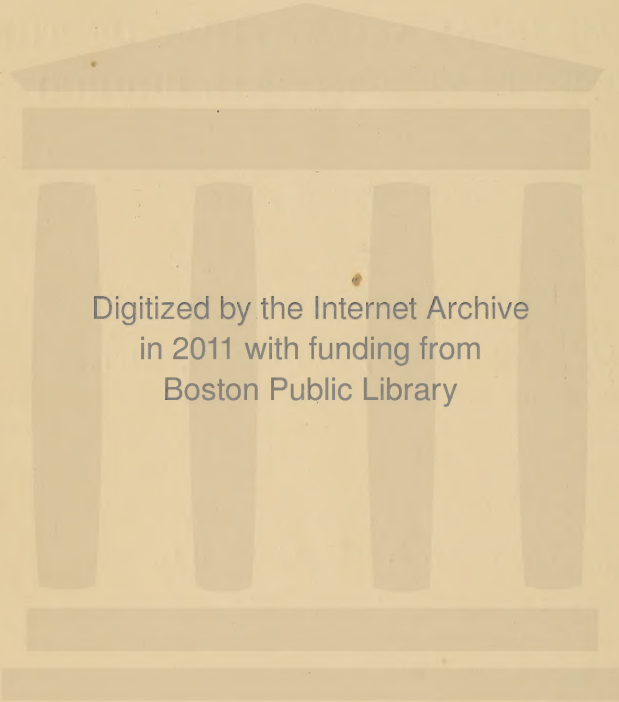
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S E R M O N .

THEN JESUS ANSWERING SAID UNTO THEM, GO YOUR WAY, AND TELL JOHN WHAT THINGS YE HAVE SEEN AND HEARD; HOW THAT THE BLIND SEE, THE LAME WALK, THE LEPERS ARE CLEANSED, THE DEAF HEAR, THE DEAD ARE RAISED, TO THE POOR THE GOSPEL IS PREACHED.
—*St. Luke vii. 22.*

It is not difficult to imagine the surprise with which these words must have been heard by those to whom they were spoken. Probably no thoughtful man ever reads them now, without somewhat of the same emotion. They are so removed from ordinary spheres of human thought; they rise to such a higher level of appeal than any on which men are wont to move; they are, in a word, so unearthly in temper, tone, and spirit, that they strike the eye of those who read them now, as strangely as they fell on the ear of those who heard them first.

How differently would an ordinary man have answered had he been asked the question which John's disciples put to our Blessed Lord. To what different things should we, left to ourselves, expect the Lord to appeal as the question was addressed to Him. That question, it should be remembered, involved His character and His office. In its obvious significance, it sought to know whether He was or not the promised Messiah; and this carried with it the further inquiry whether He was or not the Son of God. No Jew of that age could have thought of the one without thinking also of the other, as is shown by St. Peter's confession and the High Priest's adjuration.

Turn, now, to the Lord's answer to this pregnant question. Think of what He might have said, and place it beside what He did say. Think of what He did not mention or appeal

to in the face of what He did. There was the mighty mystery of his Incarnation and Nativity; there were the angelic messages that declared the one, and the angelic song, which the Church on earth shall sing in her highest act of worship till the "restitution of all things," that ushered in the other; there was the glittering star of His Epiphany; there were the descending Spirit, which John himself had seen; and the voice from heaven, which he had heard, of the Baptism. To all these things the Lord might have appealed, and, at first thought, we wonder that He did not. But He passes them all by; they do not seem to be even in His thoughts. And instead of them, we have the strange, unearthly words, "Go your way, and tell John what things ye have seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the Gospel is preached."

So the Lord places Himself beside and among those whom He came to minister to and to save. So He opens up to us the depth and fulness of the elder Scriptures, "He hath anointed me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound"; of those more wonderful words of the later Scriptures, "Both He that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one, for which cause He is not ashamed to call them brethren."

The appeal, then, which our Lord makes, is to the daily works of His daily life. We call the works that He enumerates—with one exception—miracles; and, from our point of view, we rightly call them so. But we must not forget that to the Lord they were just as much the outgoings of His ordinary life as our most ordinary doings are the same to us. To understand His appeal, we must reverently try to stand where He did, not where we do.

There is another striking thing here, not to be passed by. To human seeming the text is an anti-climax. It puts last and highest what a sign-seeking generation—and surely, if there has ever been such a generation, ours is one—would put first and lowest, "to the poor the Gospel is preached." Is not this what men call an anti-climax?

How all this, dear brethren, cuts athwart our estimates and

measurements of things, and shows us how unlike they often are to those of God! When we seek for proofs of living power and leavening life, we are apt to seek them in things that seem vast and grand; things that are marked with tumult of operation and a certain scenic display; and to forget that we ought to seek them rather in things that are far removed from these. It is not the thunderbolt, deluge, or tornado that exhibits the living forces of the world we dwell on. We look for those in that joint, quiet, continuous working of power beneath and influence above, of unseen, unnoted operation below earth's surface, and the gentle sunlight, air, and rain above it, which clothe this upper world with all its living and varied beauty.

When our Lord, then, so appealed to His ordinary human life, with its constantly recurring ministries of love and mercy, and, especially, when among those ministries He placed that highest which we should count the most ordinary of all, did He not teach men a great and wonderful truth? Did He not give His Church a very solemn lesson? Did He not set before her what was to be the very law of all her work and life? Did He not present to her the criterion to which, in the last appeal, her claims were sure to be subjected? I fully believe He did. And I believe, also, there never was an age or a Church that more needed to have those lofty and yet humbling truths brought to remembrance, than the age in which we live, and the Church of which we are the representatives.

Let no man say that in all this we are incurring the danger of falling into merely humanitarian views of our Divine Redeemer, and then from those views sliding down into a mere mawkish philanthropy, which wastes itself in sentiment, touches and goes upon the surface of things, and deals with the woes and ills of human souls as one would deal with cancers that he undertook to cure with rose-water. God be thanked! the Catholic faith which we profess preserves us from such danger. He need not hesitate to enter into all the fulness and every depth of that overwhelming truth, "The Word was made flesh," so long as he holds beside and with it that antecedent and yet correlative truth, "The Word was God." There is no possibility that the one truth shall draw us off

from the other, so long as we believe what the Church in all time has taught, that "our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man; God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and Man, of the substance of His Mother, born in the world; perfect God and perfect man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting." There is no possibility that we shall be led to try "to heal the hurt"—the real underlying hurt of men, and that is sin—"slightly, saying peace, peace, when there is no peace," so long as amid those sins we plant the saving cross, and bring human souls under the power of its mighty sacrifice; washing their "wounds and bruises and putrefying sores" in the blood of that immaculate "Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world."

Let no man say that because our Lord speaks chiefly of physical miracles, therefore the lesson which has been drawn from His words can have no place in them, and cannot, without violence, be deduced from them. Have there been no supernatural attestations of divine power in the progress of the Gospel and the Church since the days of the Apostles? Have real miracles ceased because their physical forms have disappeared? Are not the moral miracles which God has wrought in human souls all along the ages greater—be it said with reverence—than any others can be? Is not a soul purified and cleansed from sin, and raised to the new life in Christ, as clear a proof of supernal power as a body cleansed from leprosy or even raised from death? "Greater works than these shall he do," said our Lord, "because I go to the Father." He has gone to the Father, and, in the dispensation of the Spirit, the greater works have come. A modern commentator, not, assuredly, liable to the charge of indulging in fanciful or even mystical interpretations, says: "It must not be forgotten that the words here used by our Lord have an inner and spiritual sense, as betokening the blessings and miracles of divine grace on the souls of men, of which His outward and visible miracles were symbolical." And in saying this, he does but echo what the great doctor of the Western Church had said long centuries before in a magnificent passage, the length of which alone forbids its quotation here. No, beloved! the lesson drawn from the text is not far-fetched or forced.

The first thought that seems to come out to us, as we try to

work down the great general truth and lesson into somewhat of detail, is the way in which men's wants, and not their wishes, were the rule of the Saviour's ministrations. They among whom He lived were wishing for many things. They wished for multiplied signs, for deliverance from the Roman power, for a restored temporal kingdom, and an earthly prince. Many of them doubtless felt the crying evils of which every age has its own share and burden, and sighed for their removal. And then, far down under all these things, the causes of many evils, the unknown sources of many struggles for better things, there lay their real wants. For these the Lord was laboring, while He seemed to take no account whatever of the former, having, indeed, so far as man could see, no knowledge even of their existence.

How easy was it for a carping caviller of that time to say, Here is one who is declared to be sent into the world from God, with a mission such as none other ever had before. Where is the proof of it? How does he grapple with the great living questions of the time? Where is the hypocrisy of the Pharisees abated, the grinding tyranny of the Roman power relieved, the wrongs of life in all its relations met? There is no movement in the State. There is no ripple even on the surface of social life. There are a few discourses on some hillside, or from some convenient ship; there are a few days and nights of solitary prayer; a few sick folk healed; a life lived, which, but for some wonders that attend it, seems a very ordinary life; but where, where is the presence of reforming power?

And yet a new life was beginning to be poured into the empty veins and arteries of a worn-out world; the light of an undying truth was beginning to dawn on "them which sat in the region and shadow of death"; and the foundations of an empire (outlasting human empires) were beginning to be laid, in which men, in the power of the one Faith, and the abundant outshedding of the one Spirit, should "subdue kingdoms, work righteousness, obtain promises, stop the mouths of lions, quench the violence of fire, escape the edge of the sword, out of weakness be made strong, wax valiant in fight, turn to flight the armies of the aliens." And all through, in the Lord's life and in the Church's life, what shaped and

guided all the great work was not men's passing *wishes*, but their real *wants*.

Just here, as we speak of wants as distinguished from wishes, comes in a truth connected with the one that we are considering, that must not be neglected. When the Church, as the representative of her Incarnate Lord, comes into contact with the wants and woes of humanity, as she finds a certain unchanging character in these, so she also finds that she is put in trust with things that may not be changed. She must present to men the one unchanging Faith. She must maintain intact that organism which, as a living body, she received in the beginning. She must maintain and minister the Sacraments and means of grace as they were originally instituted. She must set forth that rule of living which our great Hooker says "is a rule directive unto goodness of operation," being "the definitive appointment of God's own wisdom." She must hold fast that law of worship which gives it to each person of the adorable Trinity, and gives it to none but them. These things can never change. Whatever else men need, these they always need. Methods, administrations, forms, ceremonies, these, assuredly, may be changed, "according to the diversities of countries, times, and men's manners, so that nothing be ordained against God's Word." But the things enumerated lie outside this category. The Church has but one duty as to them. As they have been received, so they must be transmitted.

And if because of this men shall object, and it may be scoff and sneer; if they shall call the Church narrow and bigoted, and behind the age, so be it. It requires no vast exertion of manhood or of faith to bear that burden and to breast that storm. "The disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his lord; if they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more shall they call them of his household."

A second thought that follows on this first one, is, that, as the text presents the personal Son of God, the individual Saviour, placing himself in living, loving sympathy with individual souls, so this suggests another rule needful for the Church in every age, never more needful than it is to-day. We, many of us, must remember how, some years ago, one

of England's noblest judges fell dead in open court while he was saying that perhaps the most threatening social evil of our time was the growing lack of sympathy between different classes, and individuals of such classes. The evil has increased since then. And to-day we see great chasms opening everywhere because of this; chasms which threaten Church and State alike with sad disaster.

Political economy cannot grapple with this evil; social science cannot remove it; co-operative unions cannot cure it. No man would deny or undervalue what they have done, or what they can do. But they play upon the surface, and do not sound the depths. Those depths can only be reached by something which can deal, and deal effectively, with the single, separate souls of single, separate men. And this the Church can do, if she will but rise to the full measure of her duty and her gifts.

We hear a great deal said to-day about dealing with the masses. The phrase I hold to be utterly objectionable; the purpose needs no commendation. But, let us not forget, if those masses are to be dealt with to any real purpose, they are to be touched and wrought upon by the Church, not as masses, but as individual souls, each in its separate personality. There can be in the Church's work no such labor-saving machines as those which, in the mass, reap vast fields, and bind the sheaves, and gather into the garner. If the Church works, she must work as the Lord did, by individual, loving, sympathizing ministries to single souls.

I see two pictures rising up before me from the early Apostolic days. Look at them with me, brethren.

A man is standing at the very culminating point of merely human culture. Everywhere around him rise stately temples, shrines, and statues, all glorious achievements of art, all rarest shapes of beauty. About him gather an eager throng, acute and keen in their intelligence, trained in intellectual culture, ready to grasp and quick to comprehend. He utters to them words on which men dwell to-day in admiring wonder, and then he goes upon his way. "Certain clave unto him and believed." But though it was Paul that preached, and though it was Athens where he preached, yet long years

elapse before we find a church established there, while we do read of the slow and slender progress of the Faith.

I look upon another picture. I see the same Apostle who preached at Athens, dwelling for "two whole years" in the great capital of the lesser Asia. There is nothing very striking about that life. He teaches daily those who come to him in the room where an ordinary teacher meets his scholars. Men see him and perhaps scarcely notice him, as he goes quietly about from house to house, "ceasing not to warn every one night and day with tears." It is certainly a very humble work. But it is one of individual contacts, personal ministrations, sympathizing love. And out of these there came that Church to which the Apostle spoke as to no other, of Christ's ideal of a "glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing"; and to the Angel of which, in later days, the Lord Himself gave distinguished commendation,—the Church of Ephesus.

Does not all this teach us something? Does it not echo the teaching of the text, and bid the Church remember that when she does what her Lord did, then, though it may be a *Via Crucis* on which she enters, it will be a *Via Lucis* in the end? For oh! dear brethren, what the Church needs to-day is not new methods, vast schemes, far-reaching projects, manifold legislation, multiplied machinery, but that love of human souls; that burning, absorbing love, in which St. Paul exclaimed, "I count not my life dear to myself"; and which wrung from the Lord's own lips the cry, "I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!"

Might it be that God the Holy Ghost, in answer to our prayers, would pour this love into our hearts! Many grand schemes, no doubt, would drop from sight, many castles in the air would vanish, many voices of debate would be silenced; there would be less "sound of hammer, axe," and "tool of iron heard in the house while it was in building." But such loss need cause no lamentation. These are no special marks or notes of a living Church. They might be found in Laodicea or in Sardis.

These would be replaced by better things. This divine love would transmute law into life, plan into operation, word

into work. Manifold evils would disappear at once. Valleys of separation would be filled up, mountains of difficulty be brought low, the crooked would be made straight, and the rough places plain. Then, in the abounding life of love, the King's daughter should indeed be all glorious within, and, because thus glorious, should stand before men in clothing of wrought gold. Then men should cry out on all sides, "We will go with you, for we have heard that God is with you."

When I have spoken, brethren, of one other thought suggested by the text, I will relieve your over-taxed patience, and finish the task that, with no good will of mine, has fallen on me. That thought is the prominence, the overshadowing prominence, which the Lord's words give to *duty*. I think we may fairly use that word, so long as the Lord Himself, speaking of His human life, said, "I must work the works of Him that sent me."

As we listen to the voices that come to our ears from within the Church as well as from without, we hear much more said about *rights* than we do about *duties*. Men seem to be fairly bristling with asserted rights, as an army used to bristle with its bayonets. And in this never-ending strife for rights, duty seems, oftentimes, well-nigh forgotten.

Now, this does not produce, by any means, the highest type of individual character; and it not infrequently places bodies of men in an utterly false position.

A man who enters on life with this, or who in the progress of life adopts this, as his ruling principle of action, irreparably wrongs himself, and endangers his highest interests. His rights are, of course, the first things in his thoughts, and this puts himself at the centre of all things. What he has the right to do, what he has the right not to do, these are the things he is perpetually seeking; and when he thinks he has discovered them, then nothing will serve but they must be put into instant exercise, and pushed to the very limit of their possibilities.

Thus he is ever living on their outer circumference and verge; he is always asserting himself, always thrusting himself against somebody or something, creating repulsions if he cannot find them, pushing in all directions, destroying

utterly all that self-restraint, that delicacy of character, that preferring of others to himself, which are essential parts of a thorough and well-developed manhood. Seeking his freedom after this fashion, he ends in the meanest and most paltry slavery, slavery to himself.

All this might have been avoided had this poor man turned his first thoughts to his duties, and kept them fixed there. Then some of his imagined rights would have disappeared; a great many more would have taken care of themselves; and all would have come to him in time, without this worry and torment of perpetual repulsion and self-assertion.

This evil is not lessened — quite the contrary — when from individuals it is transferred to bodies of men, organized or unorganized, in Church or State. It works the same tumult in such cases; it ends in a similar slavery.

Mention was made not long ago of those appalling chasms that seem to be opening around us in the social life of the period. I think those chasms are more entirely unrelieved and ghastly in this country than in almost any other. I know that we have not been wont so to think or speak, and I know that to say this involves some chance of incurring severe displeasure; but I fully believe it to be true. In most lands there are things — I speak of things outside of Christian sympathies and labors — that somewhat bridge over these threatening severances. There are ancient memories; ancestral offices and ministries that in their long continuance have almost become binding laws; relations, long enduring, of patronage and clientship; and many other things besides. With us, — we may as well face the fact, — these things have, for the most part, no existence. The one only helping thing we have — still apart from what was just alluded to — is political equality. And how much virtue has that shown itself to have in pressing exigencies and emergencies?

When, all at once, in the late summer months, that yawning chasm opened at our feet which appeared to threaten nearly everything in ordinary life, how little there seemed to be to turn to! There stood on either side contending forces in apparently irreconcilable opposition. And everywhere we heard the cry about rights! rights! rights! till nothing else was heard. If some few voices dared to speak of duties, they

were lost in the angry clamor. And yet those voices must be heard. Those words about duty on the one side and the other must be listened to, if ever we are to have more than an armed truce between these parties; a truce which may at any time burst out into desolating strife. Dear brethren, we have had a whole century of this nation's life taken up with discussions about man's rights. I know it could not have been otherwise. I recognize and am thankful for the good that has come from it. Let the Church of God, at least, begin our second century, and begin it within herself, by bringing duty to the front; teaching men, in the great words of a living English statesman, that "duty is a power which rises with us in the morning and goes to rest with us at night. It is co-extensive with the action of our intelligence. It is the shadow which cleaves to us, go we where we will, and which only leaves us when we leave the light of life." Could this be done, and were it done, it might save Church and State alike from that *anarchy* — that lawlessness — which will disintegrate the one and destroy the other, and help to usher in the Lawless One of the latter days.

A Church which shall strive to do what her Lord and Master did; a Church which shall dare to take a lowly — if you will the lowliest — place and let her works assert and prove her claims; a Church which shall go down to the dark places and the suffering ones of this earth, still so "full of darkness and cruel habitations"; a Church which, holding fast, under all reproach and pressure, what God has made permanent and unchanging, and given her simply to use and to transmit, and adapting all else to the necessities of different times and lands, shall have the courage to minister simply to men's wants, and when their wants are other than their wishes, to put those wishes by; a Church which shall bring heart to heart and soul to soul in individual sympathy in ministries of love and works of mercy, and strive to leaven and to lift the mass by leavening and lifting each single soul within it; a Church which, in the face of the show and glitter and pretension that this age delights in, shall be bold to do as Christ did, which shall neither strive nor cry, nor let her voice be heard in the streets, not breaking the bruised reed nor quenching the smoking flax; a Church which shall have

enough of faith and manliness to be absorbed in the lowly duty that so the right may be won to rise to the lofty aim, which will be strong enough to put that duty first, and let all other things, rights, honors, places, follow after and grow out of it; — what a work for God, for Christ, for man, may not such a Church accomplish in this broad land of ours? Shall it be ours, my brethren, to do it? The responsibility for that decision rests upon us, and the decision cannot long be delayed. As yet the door is open to us. As yet the opportunity is in our hands. As yet the candlestick stands firmly in its place, and the star glitters in the strong right hand of the Son of God. But if we turn from the open door, and slight the opportunity; if we “fold our arms in lazy lock”; if we begin to say, “I am rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing”; if we mistake idle dreaming and idler words for living work; — the candlestick shall be utterly removed, and the star shall fall from that right hand forever.

Holy and Eternal Spirit, Lord and Life-giver, dwelling in and presiding over the body of the Incarnate Lord, pour out upon it Thy power, Thy light, Thy life, that the words Thou once spakest by Thy prophet be made good: “Violence shall no more be heard in Thy land, wasting nor destruction within Thy borders; but Thou shalt call Thy walls Salvation and Thy gates Praise!”

